

The Apostle Matthias

The Calendar of Common Worship gives 14 May as the feast-day of 'Matthias the Apostle'. There is, however, a note at the bottom of the page that 'Matthias may be celebrated on 24 February instead of 14 May'. We'll return later to why that is so. But first it's necessary to establish what we know about Matthias. His commemoration is, literally, a red-letter festival, meaning that it is amongst the highest ranking of the saints' days – not surprisingly you may think, given that he is designated as an Apostle and is thus obviously a biblical saint. However, he is unique among the Apostles in that he was not chosen by Jesus, but by the remaining Eleven after Judas Iscariot's treachery and death had left a gap in their number. How this came about is narrated in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 1, not in the Gospels, where Matthias is not named at all. According to Acts, the Eleven returned to Jerusalem after witnessing Christ's Ascension and there, to a crowd of disciples numbering around 120, Peter proposed that they should make a choice of someone to replace Judas, selecting from among those who had been followers of Christ from the beginning of his ministry, specifically from the time of his baptism. They identified two: Joseph, called Barsabas (whose surname was Justus), and Matthias. After praying, they drew lots, and Matthias was chosen, thereafter 'numbered with the eleven apostles'. According to the fourth-century church historian Eusebius, he was one of the seventy disciples commissioned by Jesus, as described in Luke 10, v.1, and so he could have been, if – as the narrative in Acts implies – he had been a faithful follower from the beginning. But there is no actual evidence to support this, and it could simply have been an intelligent supposition on Eusebius's part.

Matthias is not referred to anywhere else in the New Testament and, in finding our way around the later apocryphal traditions about him, we are not helped by the fact that his name and thus his legends are sometimes confused with those of St Matthew. One narrative feeds off another, and so although more than one account tells us that he was a missionary in the region of Colchis (modern Georgia, stretching from the eastern shore of the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea), this is not information that can be checked for its reliability by seeing if one text independently corroborates another. But even so, it's the best information we have; and there is a marker in the ruins of the Roman fortress at Gonio, near the Black Sea, which claims to indicate where Matthias was buried. On the other hand, there is a tradition that he was stoned in Jerusalem by the Jews; and yet another that he died in Jerusalem of old age.

The feast-day of St Matthias was 24 February until 1969, when the Roman Catholic Calendar transferred it to 14 May. This was to ensure that it did not fall during Lent and to bring it closer to the celebration of the Ascension, since it was after this event that Matthias became one of the Twelve. The Book of Common Prayer has the February date, in line with what was then the universal practice. But the Calendar of Common Worship follows the modern practice of the Roman Catholic Church, presumably for the same reasons, although, as a nod to the earlier tradition enshrined in the BCP, it gives the February date as an alternative.

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